Behind the Badge: Hollywood sheds light on law enforcement in many different ways 02/01/2004

While I was at home recovering from the surgery that I talked about a couple of weeks ago, I got better acquainted with a new satellite TV system that we just got.

Before we purchased that system, we had not had cable TV for about 20 years. It was kind of funny telling people that you did not have cable TV or a dish. They would look at you like you were from Mars or something.

We got along fine without cable TV, and I am not really sure why we went ahead and bought this dish system. I suppose it had more to do with my wife's interest in the Home and Garden channel and my interest in the Outdoor channel than any feelings that we were starved for entertainment.

Anyway, during my stay at home I got to watch some old movies on TV. I am a big fan of the old westerns, particularly those made in the late 50's through the early 70's. While not really a connoisseur of or any sort of an expert on those old movies, I do enjoy watching them. I am exceptionally fond of the old John Wayne westerns.

I am not really sure why I am such a fan, either. It's certainly not because of the authenticity of the movies. It's amazing that the good guys hardly ever miss the bad guys with their handguns or rifles, making some highly improbable shots.

It's also astounding that the bad guys almost always fall when shot, but the good guys, if they do take a round, usually continue on fighting and eventually win the day and the girl.

I suppose I like them because of their simplicity. Most of them, the older ones anyway, have classic good versus evil themes. You had no doubt who the bad guys were and why they were bad, and you knew who the good guys were and what they stood for.

They stood for everything that makes America a great country; honesty, integrity, doing what's right and standing up for the little guy.

Some later movies seem to blur that good versus evil line somewhat.

I did catch a movie called "Young Guns II", which I have never seen before. It had some current stars in it including Kiefer Sutherland, Charlie Sheen, Lou Diamond Phillips, Emilio Estevez and Christian Slater. It was based on the aftermath of the Lincoln County Wars and the killing of Billy the Kid by Pat Garrett. It was apparently a sequel to a movie called "Young Guns", which I have not seen.

No, I don't know a lot about Billy the Kid, other than he was involved in the Lincoln County Wars and that he was wanted for killing several people.

Some legends say he killed 21 men; however I have read that only four can be verified. Notice I said "only" four men killed by this man, who died when he was 21 years old. By all accounts he was an outlaw and a violent killer.

The movie seemed to try and paint the Kid and the drifters he rode with as men who were really only misunderstood. They really weren't that bad and they were only doing what they had to do.

The lawmen in the movie were treated as being corrupt and the real law breakers in the situation.

How was it in reality? We will probably never really know. I do know that often in the old west there was a fine line between lawman and bad buy, and that sometimes bad guys ended up being sheriffs.

Not so in modern law enforcement. Law enforcement today is much like the theme of the older westerns. Almost every police officer I know is a very black and white person. It is either right or it is wrong. There is little that is in between.

Sometimes that type of personality can be a difficult thing, especially with the way the court system seems to work today.

Even so, I wouldn' t want it any other way.

I think we need police officers who have that black and white mentality. If it isn' t right, then it' s wrong. I know that as long as I am chief, I will do my best to make sure that is the kind of officer we have working for the Council Bluffs Police Department.

- Keith Mehlin is chief of the Council Bluffs Police Department